

Himalayan Anthropology

The “Abominable Snowman”: Himalayan Religion and Folklore from the Lepchas of Sikkim

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Before addressing the problem of the Himalayan snowman, it is important to take up some general considerations. The problem is topical because some modern mountaineering expeditions have worked with natives of the region who live by their own nonscientific concepts. While making their way through the high mountain regions, the expeditions came upon some strange tracks in the snow, the origin of which could not be immediately explained. The natives were horrified, and alluded to the snowman as the obvious explanation for the tracks. To the mountaineers this was no explanation, because the snowman had been hitherto unknown to science. Thus, a contradiction between the beliefs of the natives and the outlook of modern science led to the search for the snowman, considered by the mountaineers to be an unknown animal (Gurung 1961).

Despite the numerous expeditions that have explored the region up to the present time, no such animal has been found. The question that therefore arises is whether the problem of the snowman might not be viewed from the angle of local religion and folklore. In such an approach, the question of cultures is very complex. We must distinguish levels of different cultural origin — Tibetan and Lepcha — and at times distinguish various levels within the same culture.

The part of the Himalayan Range in which we are interested is primarily in Sikkim, but we are also concerned with some parts of Nepal. The Tibetan culture which to a high degree influences the northern regions is characterized by two levels: the ordinary old folk culture and the strongly literary, high culture of Lamaism. In many respects they are at present so interwoven that we cannot distinguish one from the other, but in other respects a number of features and elements impart a definite imprint of their origins.

The southernmost Tibetan areas have retained an old folk culture with many pre-Lamaist religious features and elements. These areas have various old centers of the pre-Lamaist Bön religion, and they have the big monasteries of Red Sect Lamaism, called *Nying ma pa*.

The culture of the indigenous Lepchas of Sikkim exhibits two religious levels: the original hunters and mountain agriculturists with their priests, priestesses, cults, and mythology; and the later, superimposed layer influenced by the local lamas of the *Nying ma pa* monasteries and their ceremonies and mythology. Through the centuries, the relationship between these two religions has developed from competition to coexistence to a kind of cooperation (Gorer 1938:186ff.; Siiger 1972:237).

For a study of the problem, we must rely on a number of written sources of varied origins and character. The local, so-called Lepcha books, written in Lepcha script, are strongly influenced by Tibetan Lamaism, and deal with other questions (Siiger 1967a:23ff.). We must, therefore, turn to the material collected in the field by students and anthropologists during the last hundred years or so. For a general evaluation of their publications, I refer to my own book on the Lepchas (Siiger 1967a:17ff.). When these publications are used as sources for the study of the present problem, however, we are faced with a special difficulty. Several of these authors use their own spellings of Lepcha words and names, which in some instances may vary from one author to another to such a degree that the same word can be almost unrecognizable. In such cases, we must turn to the entire mythological context for an explanation. Even so, we are at times left in the dark.

Furthermore, since these authors never collected their material with regard to the present problem, we have to extract a number of scattered and frequently fragmentary pieces of information from the sources in order to elucidate our particular problem. In spite of these difficulties, it seems to me that we can obtain sufficient detail to construct a mosaic, which may then be used to substantiate a tentative hypothesis.

Even so, we must be careful because the influence of Tibetan Lamaism, especially that of the *Nying ma pa*, is obvious in various ways, having left its impression on the mythology and sometimes on the cult ceremonies (Siiger 1972:236).

In both areas — the southernmost Tibetan Himalaya and northern Sikkim — the snowman figures in folklore and, in special ways, in religion.

The common Tibetan term for the snowman, *mu rgod/mi rgod*, means “wild untamed man.” He is said to be an apelike, hairy creature. This image is also associated with other terms sometimes used for the snowman, such as *gangs mi* [glacier man], *mi chen po* [big great man], and *mi*

bom po [strong robust man]. The term *mi shom po* [strong man] is also applied to the snowman (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956a:344 fn.1; 1956b:155ff.).

It is said that this snowman carries a large stone as a weapon, and that he makes a characteristic whistling sound. When walking in the high, snowy regions, he leaves very large footprints in the snow. When moving in the forests he uses all four limbs to swing from tree to tree, but in the open country he generally walks upright (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1965b:158, 160).

The Sherpas of Nepal conceive of the snowman as an apelike creature who leaves his footprints in the snow. They call the snowman *Yeti*, a term used by many Himalayan expeditions, and translated "abominable." The Sherpas avoid meeting the *Yeti* because the sight of him portends misfortune (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956b:155).

The notion of the snowman as an ape or an apelike creature brings to mind the well-known, pre-Lamaist Tibetan legend of the origin of mankind from a monkey and a divine female. But at present no direct connection can be proved (Haarh 1969:295–297 passim; Waddell 1959:19). Drawings of the snowman can be found in some picture books that seem to have originated in the Chinese-Tibetan area (cf., Vlček 1959).

Particular parts of the snowman are sometimes used in connection with Tibetan religious or magical rituals. In the iconography of one of the secret aspects of a local protective deity called *rdo rje dbang drag rtsal*, this deity is dressed in the skin of a "wild man" *mi rgod lpags* (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956a:251). Adherents of the ancient Bön religion used the blood of the *mi rgod* for certain magical rites. For this purpose the *mi rgod* had to be killed by a sharp weapon or by an arrow, and its blood was mixed with poison and mustard (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956a:344).

According to this last instance the snowman is a real creature, an opinion prevalent among the Tibetans whether they consider him to be dangerous or shy, harmless, and practically extinct (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956a:344). A snowman can live very long, a notion that arose from the story of a snowman living on the mountain called *mi go ri* [the snowman mountain], and seen limping from a wound he had received during a hunt three generations before (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956b:158).

Turning to the Lepchas of Sikkim, we shall approach our problem not directly, but indirectly, i.e., via their entire universe, because the snowman seems to be a detail of this great whole. The universe of the Lepchas comprises a huge number of supernatural beings that can be divided into two types: the mostly benign *rūm* and the hostile *mung*. Some of the supernatural beings constitute families, just like human beings (Siiger 1967a:112ff.; 143ff.; 172ff.).

A further investigation reveals that the lives of these supernatural

beings can be better understood if we attempt to arrange them into groups according to their connection with the lives and activities of human beings. In this way we may speak of certain complexes, each of which centers on a number of functions or activities in which the supernatural beings as well as the humans play parts. These complexes display, so to speak, a mutual cooperation, and at times even an interdependence, between the two categories of partners. Nevertheless, the supernatural beings still occupy a superior position. Thus one could, for instance, speak of an origin complex, a hunting complex, an agricultural fertility complex, a death complex, and others (Siiger 1968:277ff.). Some of these complexes are fairly constant because they correspond to fundamental and unalterable conditions of human life; others may change in content and importance according to the varying conditions and development of human society.

In the Lepcha hunting complex, two types of supernatural beings, *rũm* and *mung*, appear. Twenty-three names have been registered, some of which seem to be variations of the same name, but there may be more (Jest 1960:133). We cannot account for all of these supernatural beings, because at present some of them are mere names. Some of the names, however, refer to important supernatural beings of whom we have more knowledge. Thus, it emerges that certain characteristics may be emphasized, depending on the mountain zones and the particular animals with which these supernatural beings are associated.

It is interesting to note that in the highest snow regions we meet the snowman whom the Lepchas call *chu mung* [glacier *mung*] or *hlo mung* [the *mung* of the higher mountain regions]. The name *chu rũm* may also be found (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956a:344; 1956b:158; *Dictionary of the Lepcha language* 1898:382a, 81b). The word "glacier" (*chu*) appears not only in the Lepcha material but also in Tibetan material by the name *gangs mi* (Tibetan: *gangs* [glacier]). It is obvious that these names are not personal names, but indications of the region with which the supernatural being is associated.

It is further told about this being that the Lepchas worship him as the god of the hunt, the owner of all mountain game, and the lord of all forest creatures (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956a:344; 1956b:158; *Dictionary of the Lepcha language* 1898:382a, 81b). Unfortunately, we know nothing more about how the god is worshiped, but it is important to observe that his dominion also includes the animals of the forest region.

The central supernatural being of the hunting complex is *pong rũm*, also called *pum rũm* ["chief" or "principal" *rũm*] (Hermanns 1954:47ff., 30; *Dictionary of the Lepcha language* 1898:219a). His wife is *shing rũm* [goddess of the forests] (Gorer 1938:150, 244).

According to one investigator *pũm rum/pong rũm* is also known as *dju-thing* because he is the lord or master (*thing*) who leads *dju* [the game]

to the hunter. As such he is called by different surnames, depending on the species of animals he leads to the hunter: *mo-nom-dju* [chamois and the wild sheep] in the high mountain regions; *se-go-bu-log-dju* [stag and the bear] in the lower hills; and *se-wing-dju* in the lower plains (Hermanns 1954:47ff.).

As the king of all animals and the patron god of hunters, this *rūm* occupies the most prominent position in the hunting complex with a relationship to both animals and humans.

It is, therefore, no wonder that in ancient times there was an intimate connection between this *rūm* and the hunters who sought his support and protection. But the *rūm* was very strict in his demands on the hunters, and the young novice had to go through a period of apprenticeship with an old, experienced hunter in order to learn his duties (Morris 1938:196; Gorer 1938:245).

Once a year all hunters must perform a sacrifice to this *rūm*, and each time they set out for the hunt they offer a sacrifice, accompanied by a prayer. Having learned the procedure of the annual sacrifice, the young hunter must perform it regularly for the rest of his life. Should he make a mistake, he must repeat the whole ceremony because the *rūm* does not tolerate any deviations from tradition (Morris 1938:193ff.; Gorer 1938:244ff.).

When the hunter of Lingthem, northern Sikkim, has killed an animal, he places it on the ground, the head in front with a foreleg and a hind leg on either side and with the singed intestines in the middle. He crouches behind and speaks slowly and softly, gently throwing the singed intestines bit by bit over the animal's head. In Tingbung, northern Sikkim, these bits consist of the head, liver, tongue, ears, and tail of the animal (Morris 1938:193ff.; Gorer 1938:98).

These details concern the common relationship between this *rūm*, the animals, and the ordinary Lepcha hunter. There are, however, in the Lepcha society some families who, according to their own venerated lineage traditions, have ancient and intimate connections with a supernatural being (Siiger 1967a:112ff.). This applies to the now almost extinct Salong *pū tsho* [lineage] living in a remote area rather close to Mount Kanchenjunga.

One day the ancestor of this lineage, while walking through the forest, came upon what he thought was a dead bear. He cut it up and ate part of it. On doing so *pong rūm* appeared to him and said that because he had eaten part of his body, he and his children must henceforth serve him, worship him, make offerings to him. Henceforth also he and his children might eat all animals, even snakes, with impunity. The bear was in reality an incarnation of *pong rūm*, who for a while was taking a rest outside his incorporeal self (Gorer 1938:56; Morris 1938:194).

This event, which tied the *rūm* and the lineage into a kind of totemistic relationship, with the bear as the unifying intermediary, gives a profound perspective on the understanding of the ancient hunting complex. At the same time, it adds a new element to the understanding of the personality of *pong rūm*, i.e., his appearance in the form of a bear when seeking a physical manifestation.

The personality of *pong rūm* and the range of his influence will be further explained when we consider his position within the agricultural fertility complex. The center of this complex is located at the mythical *mā yel*, halfway up the great, commanding Mount Kanchenjunga. Its base shelters the female deity of the origin of mankind, while the great protector god of Sikkim and the Lepchas resides at the summit (Siiger 1968:277ff.).

From the strange *mā yel* beings, sometimes called *rūm*, living at the *mā yel* place, comes the fertility of the rice, maize, wheat, yam, pumpkins, chilies, and manioc. The *mā yel* beings number seven or nine couples, are hairy all over, very small, almost like dwarfs, and have huge goiters. This last feature is generally considered to be a characteristic of fertility. They never die; they are children at dawn, grown up at noon, and old in the evening. They have no children (Siiger 1967a:89ff.; Gorer 1938:238ff.; Morris 1938:181, 186ff.).

The most important of these *mā yel* beings are known by name, and one of them is called *mā yel yuk rūm* ["the high" or "noble god" of *mā yel*] (*Dictionary of the Lepcha language* 1898:325a). This *mā yel yuk rūm* is the same as *pong rūm*, demonstrating the intimate connection of the hunting complex with the fertility complex (Gorer 1938:236).

Moreover, in the legends dealing with the *mā yel* place, it is told that *pong rūm* has two younger brothers, and that these three together have functions as *Sok-po* [guardians] of the *mā yel* place, the ibex, and the musk deer. The younger brothers, called Mi-tik and Tom-tik, are very cruel; Tom-tik is like a bear (Gorer 1938:236).

In these legends about the *mā yel* place, there are two points of particular importance. The hunting complex is so closely associated with the fertility complex that we may consider them to be interwoven. The hunting god *pong rūm* is one of the *mā yel* beings, and as such has the particular *mā yel* name, *mā yel yuk rūm*.

Because the *mā yel* place provides the Lepcha people with agricultural fertility, the protection of this fertility is, of course, of paramount importance. This obligation falls upon *pong rūm* and his two brothers, who now guard not only the prominent animals of the high mountain regions, but also the fertility place itself. We also notice that the bear, which in the previously mentioned legend was the incarnation of *pong rūm*, is here the body of the younger brother called Tom-tik. We cannot account for this difference; it may be due to the fact that *pong rūm*, as a high ranking

member (compare his *mă yel* name) of the *mă yel* beings, cannot appear in the body of a bear, and that this incarnation has been transferred to his younger brother. In any case, *pong rūm*, the god of hunting, is also a *rūm* of the *mă yel* place, and to his ordinary function as guardian of the wild animals has been added the function of supreme guardian of the place of agricultural fertility and its inhabitants, the *mă yel* beings.

In the present Lepcha society there are two factors that are of paramount importance because they have come from the outside world and have caused a fundamental change in the basic material culture of the Lepchas.

The first is the introduction of firearms for hunting. They came into use long ago, although some few men in the remote areas still hunt in the ancient way, with bows and arrows. Hunting with firearms has influenced the old habits to such a degree that the ancient rule, prohibiting a young hunter from eating the meat of the first hundred animals he kills, does not apply to the man hunting with firearms (Gorer 1938:85; Morris 1938:193). As a whole it can be said that most of the ancient hunting ceremonies have become obsolete.

The second factor is the replacement of the old dry rice cultivation with modern wet rice cultivation, a change that took place about the turn of the century. In the wake of this development, the ancient dry rice rituals and prayers have disappeared rapidly, and today only a few old people recall them (Siiger 1967a:91).

In both cases, modern generations have demonstrated by their behavior that they can manage these two means of supplying food without the cooperation of the supernatural beings.

This growth of independence has weakened the bond uniting supernatural beings with humans so that, feeling superfluous, the *mă yel* have withdrawn from the lives of humans and retired to their distant and exclusive abode. In the past, they sometimes helped the Lepchas in difficult situations. Now, the legend informs us, they will return only if the people are on the verge of extinction (Gorer 1938:237; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956b:134).

As for *pong rūm*, the situation is more portentous. The decrease in the worship of *pong rūm* corresponds to his gradually worsening attitude toward human beings. He became enraged and reacted with persecution and punishment.

Thus, the present relationship between the hunter and the *rūm* is very strained. If the hunter does not conform meticulously to the rules of sacrifice to the *rūm*, he can be sure of some kind of retaliation, varying from minor persecutions to full-scale revenge. Hunters who neglect their ordinary ritual duties to the *rūm* may be pursued by the sinister whistling sound, characteristic of the ominous presence of *pong rūm*, or they may hear the thump of heavy stones falling, though no falling stones are to be

seen. Even the hunter's children may be persecuted (Gorer 1938:245).

The hunter's obligation of an annual sacrifice to *pong rŭm* continues for the rest of his life, even if he has given up hunting. One retired hunter who had neglected his annual sacrificial duties had stones thrown at his orange trees at night. Although he arranged an offering to *pong rŭm* and asked for forgiveness, stating that he would hunt no more, it was in vain. One night he heard his dog barking and whining in a most peculiar way. Going outside, he found it lying dead without any marks on its body (Morris 1938:195; Gorer 1938:245ff.). A keen boar hunter who had killed a dozen wild boars, but did not know the proper way of offering to *pong rŭm* after the kill, was overtaken by the anger of the *rŭm* and killed. Only his bones were found later (Gorer 1938:403). A young hunter, ignorant of the proper way of offering the hunter's sacrifice, asked his maternal uncle to do it on his behalf. But the uncle sacrificed to his own god instead of to *pong rŭm*, and the young man was taken ill and died (Gorer 1938:404).

The once-great and powerful hunting *rŭm* has turned into a primarily malicious being because the hunters have neglected proper ceremonial sacrifices. In this way his behavior becomes stamped by a psychological pattern similar to that of the neglected children of the great Lepcha goddess of procreation. Motivated by jealousy against the favored human children of the goddess, they turned into evil *mung* constantly persecuting their human brothers and sisters (Siiger 1972:240, 244).

Considering that both *pong rŭm* and *chu mung/rŭm* are supernatural beings belonging to the hunting complex, we encounter the problem of the relationship between phenomena of the natural and supernatural spheres.

There can be no doubt that some phenomena of the Lepcha universe belong distinctly to the natural sphere and others to the supernatural sphere. It is, however, obvious that some phenomena occupy a position in between, or rather, belong to both spheres. Like any other supernatural being, *pong rŭm* can manifest himself at will in whatever sphere he chooses. It may be in a visible shape, e.g., a bear, or as the originator of strange, often alarming incidents, signaling his presence and giving humans an admonition or an omen.

In sum, the ancient Lepcha hunting complex comprises many supernatural beings associated with various mountain regions, including the supernatural snowman in the glacier areas. The prominent supernatural being of the hunting complex, who is included in the agricultural fertility complex, has since ancient times preferred the body of a bear as his physical manifestation. Due to modern developments, the Lepchas have increasingly neglected their ceremonial duties toward this being who has,

therefore, reacted with jealous persecutions, deeply alarming the Lepchas. Wanderers in the mountain areas, therefore, interpret unusual sounds, tracks, etc., as omens of activity meant to punish them for their neglect.

Similarly, we might surmise that the people of Nepal might have similar notions about the supernatural world. I am well aware that I cannot at present prove this suggestion, but it seems to me that many corroborating details point in this direction.

The fear, even horror expressed by native participants of the mountaineering expeditions is a horror primarily of the supernatural side of the snowman. To them, the tracks indicated that human beings had come too close to his domain. At any moment he might reveal his presence, either by appearing in the shape of a monstrous and dangerous bear or ape, or in some other physical manifestation.

Based on the foregoing discussion, it would appear that the problem of the snowman would best be studied primarily in the context of religion and folklore and only secondarily as a zoological problem.

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* B. F. Kirtley has written a very interesting survey essay, Unknown hominids and New World legends, 1964 (*Western Folklore* 23:77-79), on the general question of hominids in folklore. I would like to thank Professor Alan Dundes, University of California, for drawing my attention to this article.

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